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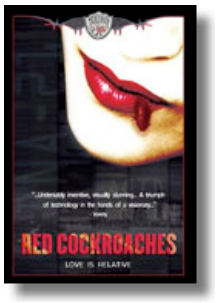
September 27, 2007

Red Cockroaches

The controversial fave of film festivals around the world proves that even existential ennui can be interesting in the right hands



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- Red Cockroaches
- Written and directed by Miguel Coyula
- Starring Adam Plotch, Talia Rubel, Diane Spodarek, Jeff Pucillo, Limor Shopen, Stu Richel
- Rated: NR
- MSRP: $19.95

By Michael Marano

IT'S THE FUTURE. OR MAYBE JUST *A* FUTURE. Regular schlub Adam (Plotch) is a bartender in a New York City choked with mutagenic acid rain, hover-car traffic, mutant cockroaches and filth. He sees a hot chick (Rubel) on a subway platform who, before she disappears into a crowd of commuters, leaves him with nothing but a suggestive glance and a tooth that she drops on the platform. When Adam picks up the dental memento, it burns him. Wisely, he wraps the smoldering incisor in his hankie and puts it in his pocket.

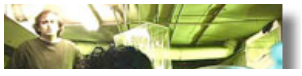
It's what you don't see that really sells a created reality.

Adam meets the woman, whose name is Lily, again. Knowing he needs a new roommate, she waltzes into his apartment to check out the place, and him. Adam seems to want to live with her, even though she's an overbearing Parisian whose presence seems to short out the TV set. The roommate interview doesn't work out. Maybe Adam shouldn't have mentioned that he loves Paris, but hates Parisians?

He has a heart-to-heart with his pal Nick (Pucillo), a scientist who looks like he should be singing in a Devo tribute band, about the fact that Nick wants to date Adam's spoiled, rich ex-girlfriend (Shopen) and that Nick wants to work for DNA 21, a new outfit that will clone the dead for a fee. Adam gets a frantic call from his nice, kitty-loving mom (Spodarek), who lives out in the country. He jumps in his car and drives out to his mom's place to discover ...

... Lily, now no longer speaking with a French accent, waiting for Adam on the back porch. Adam's mom explains that Lily and Adam share a past that they didn't know about before. How will this change Adam's life? Should Adam believe Lily's story? And how should one deal with a soggy spring in which the rain is a mutagen?

Almost too grand for two grand



Red Cockroaches was reportedly made for just $2,000. This seems impossible to me, but there really are more things in heaven and earth than

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are dreamt of in my financial philosophy. For a work of SF, the film's budget truly is the greatest source of any sense of wonder that the film might produce. That's actually a good thing.

The dystopian future of *Red Cockroaches* is matter-of-fact. Too often in SF movies, the movie itself has to stop in order to display its science-fictional tableaus. I'll forbear to name specific flicks, but I'm talking about the kind of SF movies in which, in order for a character to just open a damn door, he or she has to do a retinal scan and a DNA scan while the scanners make a whole bunch of chirping sounds and a computer voice chimes out "Identity confirmed," just to let us know we're dealing with a future society. The future of *Red Cockroaches* is just sort of there. It's cheap. It's as fake as the graphics on an old ColecoVision game cartridge. But it's folded into the dramatic goings-on in a way that becomes invisible after a while, and sometimes in worldbuilding, it's what you don't see that really sells a created reality.

Red Cockroaches is a movie about absence, about all the spiritual and moral things we can only discern from the holes they leave when they're not there. The future of *Red Cockroaches*, which after a while is only half-visible, sort of exists in the same shadowy place as do the emotions of the film's main characters. And, for that matter, the answers as to just what the hell is going on in the movie exist in that same shadowy place, too. Yes, as a dystopian bleakscape, *Red Cockroaches* quotes from *Blade Runner*. But in a weird way, that seems incidental. The meat and heart of this SF movie don't come from other SF movies. They come from the auteur cinema of the 1960s and 1970s. *Red Cockroaches* pinches from Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris*, Godard's *Contempt*, Antonioni's *Blow Up*, Wexler's *Medium Cool*. In this context, the movie might have worked without any SF trappings, but that's debatable.

Red Cockroaches is not a pleasant movie. It's a mood piece, and that mood has no corresponding emoticon in this world. Folks who like straightforward SF should stay far away. But those who stay up late wondering what a $2,000 movie directed by Ridley Scott and Pasolini would look like might want to check it out.

> ***Red Cockroaches** is supposedly the first movie in a trilogy by writer/director Miguel Coyula. I'd be interested to see what his does with this world next.* ***—Mike***

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